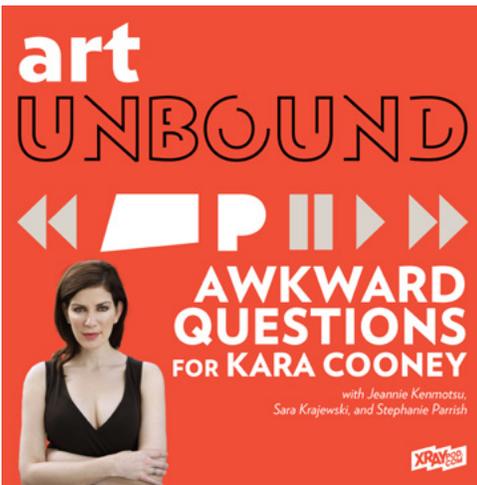


# ART UNBOUND EPISODE 35 TRANSCRIPT



## JEANNIE KENMOTSU

This is Art Unbound, the official podcast for the Portland Art Museum and Northwest Film Center. My name is Jeannie Kenmotsu and I'm the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Curator of Asian Art here at the Museum. Today I am so thrilled to be in discussion with a few of my colleagues and our guest, Egyptologist and author, Dr. Kara Cooney. But first, I want to give you some background on what exactly we're setting out to do on this episode. Back in October, we opened a major exhibition called Queen Nefertari's Egypt. This is a traveling show that began its journey at the Museo Egizio in Turin, Italy. It's traveled to the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, and will be heading next to the New Orleans Museum of Art. This isn't the first time the Portland Art Museum has shown ancient Egyptian artifacts. In the late 90s, there was another traveling exhibition called Splendors of Ancient Egypt, and then in 2006, there was The Quest for Immortality: Treasures of Ancient Egypt. Exhibitions like these are extremely popular. The artifacts on display are magnificent and they offer a window into this fascinating world that's so different from ours today. But that's the thing - there's so much that's different about today. In fact, there's a lot that's different about this museum today even from when Portland had the Egypt show in 2006. An exhibition like Queen Nefertari's Egypt raises really important issues around ethics, representation, and cultural pageantry, to name just a few. In other words, exhibitions of ancient Egyptian material don't just raise awkward questions for Egyptologists; they can raise awkward questions for visitors, and they definitely raise awkward and difficult questions for museums as institutions. We knew we needed to get multiple perspectives and critical ones. So we sought out Professor Kara Cooney, who describes herself as a recovering Egyptologist. Dr. Cooney presented a virtual lecture for our museum called When Women Ruled the World, focusing on the prominence of women in ancient Egypt. We were excited to extend that conversation with Kara here not only because she is a podcaster in her own right, but also because she does not hold back when it comes to calling out the hard truths about her field. Having this opportunity for us to address our awkward questions with Dr. Cooney is especially important to us as museum professionals who are thinking critically about our practice. But we also wanted to let the Portland Art Museum community in on the discussion. Before I introduce my colleagues and Dr. Cooney, I'd like to thank those of you who submitted questions using our online form. It is your questions that helped inform how we would approach this discussion. And now I'd like to introduce a few of my colleagues at the Portland Art Museum. First, I'd like to welcome Sara Krajewski, The Robert and Mercedes Eichholz Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art. Hi, Sara.

## SARA KRAJEWSKI

Hi, Jeannie. Thank you. I'm so excited to be here. As a contemporary art curator, of course, my focus is on the art and artists of today. But what really is resonating for me in the Nefertari exhibition is how the art from thousands of years ago reflects issues, concerns, and social dynamics we are still wrestling with. So I'm really looking forward to our conversation and digging into this with Kara.

## JEANNIE KENMOTSU

Thanks, Sara. Now, I'd also like to introduce our Director of Learning and Community Partnerships, Stephanie Parrish.

Hi, Stephanie.

### STEPHANIE PARRISH

Hi, Jeannie. I too am really excited. As Director of Learning and Community Partnerships, I'm really interested in how museums can be these incredible spaces of discovery for art, people and cultures across time and place. And I'm also a self-described museum history nerd who thinks and wrestles a lot about museums as institutions that have these really complicated histories around preserving, collecting, and displaying works of art.

### JEANNIE KENMOTSU

And although she couldn't join us for this recording, I want to note that a great deal of input was given by our curator of Native American Art, Kathleen Ash-Milby. Kathleen's perspective on exhibiting funerary objects played a large role in how our museum organized this exhibition. But finally, I'd like to introduce our guest of honor and the namesake for this episode, Kara Cooney, Professor of Egyptian Art and Architecture, and Chair of the department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at UCLA. Kara, welcome and thank you so much for joining us.

### KARA COONEY

Thanks for having me. This is going to be a fun discussion.

### JEANNIE KENMOTSU

So Kara, we had a fantastic program at the Portland Art Museum, where you gave an incredible lecture that centered female queenship in ancient Egypt. So I was hoping we could pick up some of the points and questions raised in your lecture as a starting point today. One of the major themes we wanted to continue a conversation around was the role of women and women's power. And Sara, I think you had some questions to bring forward around this.

### SARA KRAJEWSKI

Yeah, I sure did. Thanks, Jeannie. Now the exhibition organizers have really framed a narrative about royal women's roles, and to some extent, their power, or at least their status. But I find the exhibition leaves things a little bit vague. Some phrases we see in the exhibition texts are "first royal wife" and "the royal women's palace." And we get rather G-rated explanations of what these really mean. So at Nefertari's time, what was life like in this palace, the Royal women's Palace? Which I've also seen referred to as a harem.

### KARA COONEY

I love this question, because this is some of the research that I'm actually doing now. And I am reclaiming, I'm radically reclaiming the word harem. And I find it most vexing that this word is being left unused, because it makes us feel a little icky. Well, dammit, it should make us feel a little icky. And the women who worked within the harem deserve nothing less. So I do use the word harem. And people will say, Well, it's an inappropriate use of the word harem, because this is an Arabic word, taken up by the Turkish Ottoman harem, the which means harim, or not harim women, but haram, sorry, the place that you're not allowed to go into - a forbidden place, and that you can't apply this to Egypt thousands of years in the past. That it's an inappropriate and anachronistic use of the word. However, when we hear the word harem, whether it's applied to Turkish Ottoman, ancient Egyptian, ancient Chinese, ancient Persian, I think we all know in an instant what it means. And it means a collection of women for the sexual biological intensified procreation of one man. And we could call it that instead of harem. That would work for me, it's a little long, but to call it women's palaces, I mean, women for whom serving whom, in what way? It's a very innocuous expression, and I find it problematic, at best, misogynist, at worst. So, I'll leave it there. And it's funny how many women have spoken up in favor of not using the term harem. And I just don't get that from a feminist perspective. I don't understand it.

### SARA KRAJEWSKI

In this space, would women have had much control over their lives? The exhibition sort of positions it as a place where women live together, but there were also men who were overseers or you know who administrated is another term that's used...

## KARA COONEY

Yeah.

## SARA KRAJEWSKI

...the activities in this women's palace or harem.

## KARA COONEY

Yeah, I mean, let's look back at how historical feminist studies worked over the last 40 or 50 years, and it has been very much in the academic spaces, oh, I'm doing women's studies of ancient Greece, look, here are some women. They existed, this is what they did - kind of - and we will look at it. Famous examples of certain women, and we will set them up as examples for all other women. And these are very problematic ways of dealing with women's history. Because what this exhibition is doing, in a sense, is taking Nefertari, the great royal wife, the number one woman, and making her an example for all women of ancient Egypt, that all women could have such a thing, which is like kind of trickle-down social status, if you like. A way of saying, oh, Jeff Bezos has \$300 billion, you could too if you play your cards right. You bootstrap it correctly, and you work hard enough. So Nefertari could have it, so any ancient Egyptian woman could have had this status and this power, which is discounting the systemic hierarchical system, as it existed, that Nefertari coming from a certain family, certain region, we presume, is that she would have had access to a different kind of power, then maybe a royal beauty without the kind of title that she had, access to her husband that she had. It's an interesting thing, this harem, because it is purposefully shielded. It is very little spoken of directly. You don't know exactly who the women were that work. Do we use the word work? Who lived within, dwelled and existed within this institution? What were their freedoms? Or their lacks of freedom? These things are really difficult. But let's take two examples just to be hypothetical, you've got Nefertari on the one hand, who's the great royal wife, the highest ranking woman and we have a lot of evidence for her. You have her depicted in a high context, she gets her own temple in Abu Simbel, for example. Her her tomb in the Valley of the Queens is still one of the masterpieces of art in our eyes. And that would have afforded her and her children a great deal of prestige and privilege in her life. Now compare her to a woman who is unnamed, maybe a woman from the provinces somewhere, maybe a delta woman, who was brought in because everyone thought of her as a beauty, maybe she was defined as being extraordinarily beautiful at the age of 10 or 11. And maybe that beauty drew the gaze of certain high functionaries, who then connected to institutional leaders of the harem, who then placed this girl into the Kings harem. And maybe she's there as a dancer, an entertainer of some kind without a real title. She's just meant to be pretty, maybe she draws the attention of the king now and then, and is drawn into sexual intercourse with the king. How many times in her life does this happen? Twice? Three times? Maybe she becomes a favorite. And he sleeps with her and brings her around with him, you know, but she's not got the level of prestige that somebody else has, and thus, we do not know her name. How many women served in the harem from the 18th dynasty? The 19th? We don't know. There's no spreadsheet of these women. Though the Egyptians love to make lists, we don't have anything like that. And it's a it's very easy to look at history and find the Nefertaris, the Nefertitis, the Hatshepsuts and say these are representative of women in the ancient world. And instead, we need to pull back and say these are very particular women who are serving particular functions within a patriarchal system, and then ask how a patriarchal system commodifies women, and that's my starting point.

## SARA KRAJEWSKI

Mm Hmm. Yeah, we did have a really interesting question come in during your lecture from Claire. And I find this is a very contemporary topic, as well, as we see what's happening at the Supreme Court right now over abortion access. Her question was, how did women control their fertility in a place like the harem? And what relationship did that fertility have to gaining and maintaining power or status? Really fascinating how we would even come to know that.

## KARA COONEY

It's a tricky question. And there's all kinds of things swirling around in my head as I try to answer it in a clear a way as possible. Women who have access to herbs and natural medicines, as they would have in the ancient world, will always have access to abortifacients, and will always have access to stimulants or aphrodisiacs. And we can look at both

of these. I mean, it's an interesting thing that in the United States, or sorry, in North America, one very well known abortifacient is cottonseed oil. And women who worked on plantations, enslaved women who worked on plantations who might have been drawn into sexual activity with the quote unquote master knew that cottonseed oil was a very important abortifacient to be used if they could get their hands on it. And obviously, cotton was available to most people working in cotton plantations. In Egypt, and I don't know the abortifacients, and I would have to look into it. But these things are there. And you might ask, well, why would a woman want to use something like that in a harem situation? But you've already pointed out that there are all of these officials who worked in the harem, there are male guards, there are bureaucrats. And one can imagine that some of these girls would have been as commodities with the king not around watching all the time, drawn into exploitive relationships with some of these men who are meant to watch over them. The Egyptian harem has no evidence of eunuchs, emasculated men working within them. Or maybe they fell in love with the guard or you know that there could be very allowable or sanctioned sexual relationships happening in their own minds. But then once they conceive the child, then it becomes very problematic and an abortifacient might be necessary. So there's that on the one side, and then on the other side, there's the aphrodisiacs with Egypt, which the Egyptians are much more open about. And if you look at wonderful scenes, and I can share these images with you from the high gate of the Temple of Millions of Years of Ramses III, which is about six or seven generations after Ramses II and Nefertari, you can see the king who was surrounded by young females, like just barely pubescent females, they look like they're 12 or 13 years of age, and on their heads and all around you see images of the mandrake and the poppy. The mandrake is a known aphrodisiac, but it also - the root can induce hallucinatory states and can actually put you out if you take too much. But when applied properly, the mandrake fruit can create an erection. So it's a really interesting thing to show the king with a cut mandrake in his lap, right where that erection would be showing that he is capable of performing with his women. So they won't show the abortifacient that you might read about some of these things in medical texts. And I would have to follow up with a look to that, and ask some of my colleagues who deal with these medical texts more carefully. But the aphrodisiacs are there and you know that this is a restricted knowledge that women would pass down to each other, that women when they pass down to each other are often excoriated for, called witches. It's considered inappropriate knowledge sometimes when the patriarchy can step in. You see less of that in Egypt, which is interesting. And that's another - it's another question. So I'll, yeah, I'll stop with that one.

### **SARA KRAJEWSKI**

Yeah. Great. It's just so fascinating to get this insight into what one's lived experience may have been like at that time, because these exhibitions really do, as you described, elevate one individual or a kind of class of individuals as the example of what life was like at that time.

### **KARA COONEY**

It's meant to be positivistic. It's meant to be celebratory, because that helps us to apply a positivism to the ancient world to say, Oh, look, women have made it we're good now. Everything's fine. These women are good examples. We'll teach the young girls how to be and the fact that it all happens within the context of the patriarchy makes it even more useful for the people who are positivistically and celebratorially putting them forward.

### **SARA KRAJEWSKI**

Yeah, absolutely. Feels very familiar to what we may be going through today. I wanted to shift the questions just a little bit because in another kind of sense of lived experience in ancient Egypt, skin color gets mentioned in a few exhibition texts, and I believe it was one text that indicates in a kind of simple way, men are depicted with darker skin because of living and working outdoors. And of course, I think this treated this way brings up lots of questions. An audience member from your lecture, Eileen Deerdock, picked up on this as well, noting that a label describing a small statuette indicated that the skin was painted to appear lighter to indicate this woman's royal status. So Eileen, of course, was picking up on references to skin lightening makeup elsewhere in the show and connecting it to standards of beauty that favor whiteness or proximity to it in our time. So what do we know about colorism in ancient Egypt? And what was race like in ancient Egypt, if that's even a concept they would have lived with?

## KARA COONEY

Aren't these complicated things? And isn't it interesting that the Egypt that we now receive is so colored, literally, by colonialism and our own burden of chattel slavery and what that is applied to this corner of Northeast Africa, it's very hard for us to disassociate ourselves from that. But let's have a go of it. So let's see what we can do. You know, Egypt had three traditional enemies. Two of those enemies are depicted with lighter skin than the ancient Egyptians. And those would be the Libyans and the West Asians, traditionally called Asiatics, which is- for the West Asians, which is a considered a very, very racist moniker now. And then of course, there are the Nubians, Kushites, many different names can be applied to the people of Nubia or modern day Sudan to the south, and their skin is depicted very dark. The Egyptians have a skin color that is somewhat between these two. So, can you apply races to it? I mean, I think you actually can. This will probably fly in the face of what other ancient scholars feel that you can't use this word race in association with the ancient world. The ancient people didn't use the word race and no, there is no term for race. But there's no term for art in Egypt either. And we talk about that and Egyptians are created a whole lot of it. So this idea that you have a Libyan group and a West Asian group and a Nubian group and an Egyptian group that is favored, is very racially understood in my mind and that there is a positivism associated with the Egyptian race or group. I think that humans have worked with these exclusionary and hierarchical systems ever since the agricultural revolution put us into these hierarchies and ever since regional states were created, Egypt is the first regional state on the planet. It's the first one to not just have a city, or city state, but to expand beyond and to connect many different urban spaces together. And as such, they're like, we are the chosen people and those other people, let us identify them, they look like this. They dress like this, they have skin color like this. If that's not racial thinking, I don't know what is. So it works- It works for me. Now, where we get confused, and where we say oh, they don't have racism is that they're depicting people with light skin and people with dark skin, and they're in the middle, and thus they can't have skin color racism. And I feel that that's problematic as well. For the ancient Egyptians, they were just like the bear in the middle of the Goldilocks tale where everything was just right, and not too light, not too dark. But of course, things changed. As the Bronze Age collapse comes in, and the Sea Peoples come in, and the idea of what it is to be Egyptian and how one is meant to look also changes through time. And then when the Greeks colonize Egypt, after Alexander the Great and the city of Notochris. And all of these places, an idea of what Egyptian skin color's supposed to be also changes. And Egypt will be buffeted around by colonialism and many different ideas of what the ideal race is. Those are complicated questions. But let's go back to the male/female question that you started with, which is so very interesting. Within an agricultural patriarchal society, in which women are meant to work within four walls receive scarce resources from the men folk, and be commodified themselves. It is no surprise that the women as they're competing vis-a-vis one another, are trying to separate themselves from a mere peasant woman, and show themselves as a woman, as a lady, a woman of leisure, a woman without any sort of work that she has to do so that she's not outside under the hot sun. So there is an internal competition within a patriarchal system of women parading their light skin, to show their ability to not have to do manual labor, and their better socioeconomic status and their access to more scarce resources. And you see this all around the world still to this day where women will, in colonial systems and without, from Asia to South America, you're going to see women engaging in skin lightening, either they stay out of the sun, and they wear the visor or whatever, or they're always putting on sunscreen. I wear sunscreen, I mean, we should all do this, right. And I'm a woman of Irish Italian ancestry in California. So you know, we have to do these things. But you can also engage in skin lightening that's more dangerous, involving lead or other chemicals that might lighten your skin. But the Egyptians, they didn't hold back on this, they actually showed women with the yellow ochre and the men have the red ochre. But they're showing this like on coffins or statues or tomb walls. They're all patrician women. They're all women who are of a very high socioeconomic class. But one little tiny thing, and then I'll let you get to your next question is, I'm a coffin expert, right? And I look at coffins from the perspective of gender, buying opportunities, restricted knowledge about religion. Female coffins, they show a certain kind of hair and earrings, they show a lighter skin usually not always, this can change. But they almost always show hands that are flat versus hands that are fistled because the man is active, and he goes out into society and does things whereas the woman is meant to be passive and receiving, a vessel, and commodified. And the light skin goes with that. It really does. Yeah.

## SARA KRAJEWSKI

Mm Hmm. Very interesting how these standards have kind of come down through literally millennia. So I think this

is the points you're starting to make around coffins and depictions on coffins is a great lead-in to our next set of questions that I believe Jeannie will be asking on behalf of Kathleen.

## JEANNIE KENMOTSU

Yeah. So we've been talking a lot about the, you know, sort of enduring popularity of ancient Egypt as a topic in museum exhibitions and Discovery specials that you know, so forth. You know, of course, there's this fascination with like reconstructing the history of the ancient world, kind of some of these things we're all curious about in recovering, but there's also this kind of popular association, of course, with tombs, with mummies. And so I wondered if we could talk a little bit about this kind of obsession with the dead and the bodies of the dead, the relics of the dead. This is something I think about when I encounter exhibitions of ancient art, whether it's Egyptian or Asian, but I think our audience members ponder this, too. We got a couple of questions around some of the ethical considerations in exhibiting ancient artifacts, and wanted to talk a little bit about your perspective on that.

## KARA COONEY

So my perspective is gonna potentially be a little more Marxist and less NAGPRA than you might expect, if that makes any sense. And I'll tell you what I mean. Depicting a mummy in an exhibition, in my opinion, is very different from showing a Native American body or an enslaved human body for our consumption, visual consumption. And the reason is, mummification and funerary arts production were social separators par excellence for the ancient Egyptians, we're talking about 5-2% of the population who could afford these things, who paraded these things in sumptuous displays, to make sure that everyone realized that they and only they would have the physical ability to stay in this world for longer, to connect with their ancestors, to become a superhero kind of ancestor who could be intercessed in the afterlife. This great show, and the dead do not bury themselves, put on by the family members of the dead was a means of elevating certain families, creating superhero ancestors making sure their family lineage was revered and feeding into patriarchal patronage systems that allowed a hierarchical inequality to continue unabated. Because the Egyptians did that, because they put so much wealth and so much expertise and trial and error and invention into mummification, coffin creation, varnishing, and all of these things that they did. It's one of the reasons I think we're so obsessed with it, and why we want to consume it so much. Because we also want to live forever, we also we understand immediately, whether we can enunciate it - verbalize it or not, we know that they're telling us about their social power, that they are communicating that they have something that we desperately want, and they're going to show it to us, and we just get to look at it, we don't really understand it. What are those texts mean? And what is it, we know that it's something very important, but we're not allowed to really completely understand it, there's a lot of restricted knowledge involved in this. In my opinion, if people engage in that kind of pageantry, they deserve nothing less than to be shown in museums after the fact. This is a little bit different from what a lot of people have been saying lately that dead people should never be on display in museums, and you know what a mummy without any sort of covering on it, I feel the same way. You know, we don't have to show their genitalia. We need to treat them with respect. But if you have people putting in a ton of time, money, ingenuity into preserving their body for forever, what did they expect was going to happen? The body is now there forever. It is there as a kind of relic if you like, I think that it's deserving of and necessary for study. It's something that can be put, in my opinion, in a museum context with the right kind of explanation. And if people are intensifying the preservation of their body artificially, then if they happen to be displayed artificially, somewhere, I'm okay with that. These bodies were meant for display within their own social circles, as mummies, as things that are more than a human body. So I understand our obsession with it. And I'm not- I don't- and I feel the same way about many Peruvian mummified examples. Not all. Not all, because there's a lot of human sacrifice involved in some of these things, right? So it gets very problematic. Now, if a human being did not intend that, and this is- it's like a legal argument, right? Where you're asking for intention, kind of like if you murdered somebody and you didn't mean to because you were just running them over with your car, but you're old and it's manslaughter. But if you meant to and you planned it, you have intent, then you're going to get a worse sentence. And I feel the same way about, and I'm just coming up with this right now, this legal argument. I feel the same way about these bodies, that if there is an intent of this artificial preservation, then you know, you get what you deserve. But if there is not that intent, and we can prove it, I think circumstantial using the tools that we have as historians, anthropologists, bioarchaeologists, I think we can. And so that's where I go with this. But it is very different from what a

lot of Egyptologists and other specialists do say.

### JEANNIE KENMOTSU

This is really interesting. Thank you. I probably jumped the gun a little bit. Kathleen, who couldn't be here did, you know seed me with some questions to pose to you. So I'm actually going to backtrack slightly and sort of give some of that context. And then and then follow up on what you were were saying there. So Kathleen, who's our Curator of Native American Art, was concerned from the beginning of our planning for this exhibition about being sensitive to our Native American community members. You mentioned NAGPRA, a little while ago.

### KARA COONEY

Yeah.

### JEANNIE KENMOTSU

So you know, as you know, in some Native American cultures, it's disrespectful if not dangerous to exhibit objects removed from desecrated graves. And so for this reason, you know, taking a lot of things into consideration, we did a couple of things in the exhibition, we included text to inform visitors that many of items in the exhibition were from graves. Surprisingly, some people, that's not obvious. And also, we did choose to not include the human remains that did appear in other venues for this exhibition. So Kathleen couldn't be here, but one of the questions she posed that I think is- you were already starting to gnaw at was how we reconcile these really different perspectives on the treatment of the dead in museums where you have these diverse audiences and constituents. I mean, every museum is different, every region is different. I'm curious about your thoughts on that?

### KARA COONEY

Well, colonialism changes everything, and so does occupation of another place. Right? So within Egypt, the display of these bodies does not disturb me, but as you say, if you're taking these bodies, and you're now putting them into a place that has been forcibly occupied, and colonized, then it's going to have a very different meaning. And you can say oh, but the Egyptians are sending us this and this isn't an Egyptian show. This is coming from Turino, but the Egyptians could have and have done, they have shown these bodies and so there I think your sensitivity is right on and you're putting things into the context of the consumer, the viewer, the person who is trying to learn about this ancient culture. The other thing I would add, and you know, I get this about, I have to be sensitive on my own social media about discoveries in tomb context. I work in tomb contexts, right? This is- I'm a coffin expert. This is what I do. The coffins hold bodies, or once held bodies if they're not in there anymore. And how do I justify that in my own mind? And again, I come in with a bit of a Marxist perspective here, because we're talking about a society that engaged in systemic upholding of inequality, social inequality, such that a minority was able to pull in gilded objects, solid gold objects, imported wood, all kinds of amazing things beautifully decorated. It's, you know, the ancient Egyptians were, I also study reuse, re commodification, and tomb theft in the ancient world. This happened in the ancient world all the time, because there is a way for people who have been oppressed to pull those resources back to themselves when governments and systems collapse. And that's something I'm very interested in. I think that the ancient Egyptians dealt with this themselves, they knew that they had to abandon the pyramid because the pyramid was a beacon that pretty much said, Awesome stuff here, come and rob me. And they had to choose the Valley of the Kings instead, trying to create a secret location, but they couldn't help themselves. Because human beings are this way, by the time you get to the end of the 20th dynasty, tombs that had been secret, and put unmarked into cliffside that were very high and difficult to get to are now like temples with big, you know, entrances. And every one's like, Look at me, look at my tomb, I'm so awesome. What do they expect is going to happen but some kind of re commodification and reclaiming when that system collapses? So if you're going to surround yourself with gold, you must expect that people are going to go searching for, as you put it, with the exhibitions that you mentioned at the top of the show, treasures. Right? Quest for immortality, Egyptian treasures, this is what we want to acquire and to consume ourselves in these exhibitions. And it's all just swirling around in my mind of more patriarchal excess, and that our consumption in these exhibitions of these treasures is a way of feeling like we can claim them and they belong to us, in a sense - colonially, economically, and the bodies are kind of the collateral damage of the whole thing. But they are also the original

agents, in many cases, of pulling these resources, these scarce resources, and hoarding them and keeping them for themselves. So it's a really interesting push and pull, and you used the word gnaw, which I really liked. Because it's as complicated as you can possibly get. Who gets to see these bodies? How does it work? Do you just keep them in storage so that you can examine them there? Are you even allowed to examine them? And, and obviously, I have some opinions that you can, and we should, but I also understand that people think, Oh, these tombs are being desecrated. Do you remember when the King Tut, whenever it was, like, oh, there's a tomb behind the back wall of King Tut, and we should drill a hole and see what's there? Well, I got all kinds of emails and pushback and people saying, they should be left unharmed, and this tomb should not be open. And they're I'm like, Oh, come on, really? You're gonna tell me there might be a tomb full of intact treasures that were purposefully buried there in a totally socially unequal, hierarchical, patriarchal system, and then I'm not allowed to see it because I get to protect those patriarchs? No way, there's no way that I'm going to stand for that. I think they should be examined, and they should be removed, even if we know that that tomb hasn't been opened yet. I'm okay with that. Isn't that interesting? And I think a lot of people would be. But if you're talking about a Native American burial that was placed there without the intent of anyone looking at it, it needs to stay the way- the way that it is

### JEANNIE KENMOTSU

So interesting. Yeah. You know, this is something we face in the field of Asian art, too, you know, with funerary objects. And on the one hand, there's this argument that with ancient art, they're not here to tell us about their world. I think you make a really compelling argument about the kind of pageantry as you say, or self presentation of the tomb, that there is already this built-in element of display. And these objects, of course, are in many cases indispensable to tell any kind of material culture history about their world, right? To tell their story. I'm also curious, just because I, you know, I'm not conversant in your field, what is the conversation with your colleagues who are Egyptian? And what is also the conversation in Egypt today about whether there are any concerns about the beliefs of ancient Egyptians whose remains and burial items are exhibited today? This was also one of Kathleen's questions.

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Well, one could gnaw on this quite a bit as well, because I don't know if you know about the parade that happened of the bodies going from the Egyptian Museum, Cairo to the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization. And this parade was a mechanism of bringing the actual physical bodies of the Kings, the New Kingdom Kings, under the auspices of President Sisi, and giving them a new home, but showing his ownership of them and his reception of their power. So in the same way that a Peruvian mummy is used to consecrate a new temple and is moved, if a Temple is moved, that body might be moved to re consecrate it. We saw the same thing in Egypt not a couple months ago. So these bodies in Egypt, it's ambivalent, I'm not gonna say it's easy. And we have to gnaw on this idea, because you've got on the one hand, the movement of those bodies, while the bodies were shielded, they were inside of the coffins that originally, when they were founded in in Deir el-Bahari, their recoffined location. So the bodies weren't shown moving in the parade. But everyone knew the bodies were in there. And the bodies will be on display in a very respectful location and are on display at the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization, where their bodies genitalia, of course, but their bodies are covered, their faces are shown. When you're in that room, the lights are down, and you must speak with hushed voices, because the Egyptians want these bodies to be respected, they are the dead, and yet they're displayed. And yet they're claimed politically. So you can't get more complicated than that. The Egyptians do not like the display of these dead individuals, but politically and ideologically, they have no problems with displaying them with a modicum of ideological reserve such that they can claim them politically.

### JEANNIE KENMOTSU

It's so interesting.

### KARA COONEY

Yeah.

## JEANNIE KENMOTSU

So one more question on this topic. This came up during your lecture and again in a listener submission. Theresa asked about this practice of, I think, primarily late 19th and early 20th century archaeologists who in excavating tombs would take the skeleton of a body and discard it or dispose of it and just take the skull home, right to London or Paris or wherever. Can you talk about that practice?

## KARA COONEY

I was just talking to a colleague about this practice today. It's so interesting the way these things can work. That colleague is Professor Salima Ikram, who works at American University in Cairo. And she is a bioarchaeologist and I'm like, What is it with the skulls Salima, what's going on? And she's like, well, I said, is it racist? They're trying to take the skulls so they can measure brow ridges and cranial capacity and say that these people were the dynastic race, and thus akin to being Caucasian or whatever, that and Caucasoid whatever these racial terms are? And she said, No, it's not just that. She says they keep skulls, and they keep hands, sometimes feet, but often hands, and I was like, oh my god, it's like the most human identifying things. It's the things that if I told you all to close your eyes right now, and imagine the hands of your mother, you would be able to see the hands of your mother, you would know what her fingernails look like, what her cuticles look like, what the little, the knuckles look like you would know that that hand cooked, or hit, or you know, was capable of love and bad things and good things. But there was, it's your mama's hand, you can see it. And you can see her face, too. And these are things that we humans are conditioned to keep in our memory banks. We're not conditioned to keep a chest, or leg, or an arm. You know, they're not. And also, and also, when you keep these parts of the body, even mummified, they're more smelly. They're, they're just they take up a lot of space. A head and a hand, you can take a big body and make it VWOOP into this teeny little discreet package that you can then bring back to England, bring back to New York, or whatever. And the heads that we were talking about. And the reason I asked Salima, this is these are things that Herbert Winlock, the archaeologist associated with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, found in the early 20th century at Deir el-Bahari. And when he was finding these bodies, many of them in the notes are described as quite smelly, and on their last legs in terms of preservation instead of trying to consolidate in the 1920s or 1930s. They just said, Okay, I'll take the head and a hand or two hands and we're good and then dispose of the rest, with the understanding that those things are going to tell you the most and you know, you can do a lot with a head. William Flinders Petrie also only kept the heads from the sacrificial burials of Abydos and at Abydos for dynasty one royal burials. And one of my former graduate students now Dr. Rose Campbell, she has been to Cambridge and to the V&A in London to look at the crania that were retained, to do an examination for trauma, perimortem trauma, postmortem trauma, premortem trauma. How did these people die? Right? If they're sacrificed, and we can see it architecturally, can she show that they receive some sort of trauma, perimortem trauma, and she's only got the crania to work with, which is super frustrating. If they just kept some vertebrae, we could say some more and long bones too. But, you know, I have lots of thoughts and feelings on this. And wouldn't one love to find the bodies that were discarded by Petrie, at Abydos and I imagine it could be found. And then what could one do with those bodies in terms of isotope analysis, or maybe DNA analysis and other things? But teeth are pretty good for DNA analysis. So um, yeah, it's interesting, isn't it?

## JEANNIE KENMOTSU

It's really interesting. So interesting, because as you said at the beginning, it's kind of the most tender, most sort of human parts of the body. And then also, they're taking them because they're probably- they pack up neatly, they're not as smelly. There's all these practical and logistical kinds of reasons.

## KARA COONEY

Yeah.

## JEANNIE KENMOTSU

Actually, that's a great segue to our third sort of big bucket of questions around museums, Egyptology, institutions, all of which has a direct relationship, of course, to this kind of late 19th century moment that has so much bearing on your field. Stephanie, I know you have a few questions around this. You want to kick us off?

## STEPHANIE PARRISH

Yeah, absolutely. It's so interesting to kind of think about the last, you know, thirty minutes of us talking about the content of the exhibition, women's power, and I think, Kara, one of the things I appreciate about your kind of approach is the taking us behind your thinking and sort of revealing, making more transparent some of your own questioning and your own critique of your field. And you know that it's a- you're an expert, but you're also learning and you're constantly like critiquing and evaluating. And I think we do that a lot in museums now, too. Maybe more now than ever. And so I guess I kind of want to just talk a little bit about, you know, some of that, making our fields more transparent, and giving people an understanding of, you know, what some of these exhibitions, they're coming to, like the context of them, the history of collecting and display and preserving. Because I think we take a lot of things sort of for granted, like why things are the way they are.

## KARA COONEY

These are tough questions. And this is really interesting. Where I would start, because I'm obsessed with power, and that's what most of my writing seems to swirl around. Museums are institutions that maintain pre-existing systems of power. And we understand them as such. And, yes, there are some museums that try to undercut that power. But what is the museum but land set aside by rich people, to take objects saved and bought and donated by rich people to then give to the public with their names under them so that everyone can recognize the pageantry and display of rich people. And we are- and it is a patronage system. So we go in, we might pay admission, we might not pay admission, it might be free, because of the patronage it has given to us. But that give and take is something that when we enter a museum, we feel that we are the powerless ones who are viewing and told the story, and that that story is formed and shaped. And those objects are pulled together by people who are telling us what our story - human story should be, might be a story of natural world, it could be all kinds of different stories. And so most museums are not places of radical reframing. Most museums are not places where you allow the public to have any sort of say in what is going on. And most museums are, stay away from that piece. Don't touch this, you got a guard in every room to make sure the objects are kept safe. And I'll take an example from the Getty just recently. About how long ago did this happen? About seven or eight years ago, the Getty fired their entire skilled and educated education force in one go. And they explained it by saying they needed more money for acquisitions. And the Getty just bought a painting of a man looking at a window, and you can check how much it cost, but it's in the hundreds of millions of dollars. They bought- I think. I think it is, check and see how much it costs. But they bought a painting of a man staring out a window. And one of my grad students said, Oh my God, this would have supported this many workers at this museum for this amount of time doing this kind of work. And I posted that, and a lot of my colleagues said yes, but the painting is beautiful, and look at what they have purchased. And this is an amazing thing. And so museums actually make us ask, what is more important - education or things? The rich people or the poor people moving up in society? And when the Getty decided to cut their skilled education museum force, which had masters degrees and was able to create all kinds of complicated narratives that help the public to reframe what the museum was feeding them. It makes perfect sense in terms of ownership, hierarchical society, they didn't want the public to have that kind of connection to their art. Instead, they wanted to be able to buy more pieces, have these things, show these things, and show their power. They replaced that education force at the Getty with volunteers who don't have the skills and don't have- some do, I'm sure. I'm sure there are very good volunteers there. But they didn't go to school to learn how to educate schoolchildren bussed into the Getty. Many students of color coming to a very white part of town in Brentwood, and going to a very white institution where white people gave all of their money to buy these objects. Showing white people, right? So you know, museums, you know, I think about this all the time, I just saw a museum, I think it was the Met. And it was Ramadan. So this is a while ago, and they showed some altar pointing to Mecca and said happy you know, Ramadan and then all these people are like you need to give that altar back and who do you think you are? You don't get to have this altar. And you can't you know, a museum has really got its back up against the wall. How did you get your stuff? Who did it come from? Why are you showing it? What are you doing? Because it is- a museum is essentially a tool of the rich to show their power. It is our modern way of modifying our bodies. It truly is, it truly is. And so museums are, you know...

## STEPHANIE PARRISH

I love it.

## KARA COONEY

...and that's why they're underfunded when the rich people pull out and it becomes a place for the community, then forget it, they don't get any more money. It's done. Unfunded. And you guys know what it's like to work three jobs, because 50 years ago, your museum probably hired a whole lot more people than it does now. So it's the same thing I say that as soon as Black people got to go into the swimming pools, they're like, fine, we don't need swimming pools. We're just not going to do that. As soon as people of color decide they want to get educations, too they're like, oh, it's gonna be really expensive. Now get a student loan to become middle class. All of these things are part of this conversation.

## STEPHANIE PARRISH

Talking to you sometimes reminds me of one of my favorite artists and a colleague of yours at UCLA, Andrea Fraser, who is known for institutional critique. That idea of, you know, turning- artists turning their eye on to the institution and the structures and making those problematic systems visible. Do you think of yourself as a practitioner of institutional critique within your own field of Egyptology?

## KARA COONEY

Oh, hells yes. And I had a colleague write me not long ago saying, oh, what does it feel like to be a recovering Egyptologist?

## STEPHANIE PARRISH

That was my next question.

## KARA COONEY

And I wrote back and I was like, ah, ha, ha, ha, I started with it feels fine. You know, and then I got to the topic at hand, which was about an article for somebody's special. But um, you know, I recognize my privilege as somebody who gets a salary and benefits and a pension from one of the few surviving state schools that hasn't completely privatized. But you know, what? UCLA is almost there with everybody else. And I am part of a dwindling FTE that has tenure at a university as we privatize and Uberize our teaching at universities around the land. I'm one of those few full time people left. When I started, I'll say, maybe 50% of teaching at a university was done by full time faculty with benefits. Now, I would say that 20% of teaching at Universities is done by full time faculty with benefits. And I am now- and look at us, all women working for these institutions, then people are like, Oh, you have so much power. I'm like, No, it's as soon as they carpet bomb and privatize the institution and defund it that women get to come in and be a part of it, because the men don't want to have anything to do with it. And that means that we are truly living within a patriarchal system that we may want to be post-patriarchal, but we ain't there yet. So Egyptology is all a part of these bastions of power and the way Egyptology works to celebrate, and positivisticly uncritically set this power before us, going dynasty by dynasty and being all particularist and getting all of the details straight, without understanding that they are celebrating an authoritarian regime. I now have problems with that. But I didn't have problems with it as a grad student. I didn't see it in that way, because I didn't have my great white American awakening yet.

## STEPHANIE PARRISH

Right. Right. Maybe that's sort of a good segue to my next question. I have really enjoyed your YouTube series, and especially your 2020 episode, which was "Is Egyptology Racist? Short answer: yes." Which I recommend it to many people. And early on that episode, you know, you talk about that you'd like things complicated and messy, which I also appreciated. Because as a museum history nerd, I too, like the complicated and messy. I don't think you can work in a museum and not have that as well. And you talked in that episode about an early moment in your career at the National Gallery of Art. And I think you were a Kress fellow, a Samuel H. Kress fellow, and you talked about- you had applied for a non-western position. And that when you got there, it was like, Well, no, Egypt is a Western discipline.

And I just wanted to ask you about like how museums are so a part, right, of this definition of Western/non-Western and what that felt like? Like at that moment in your career, and how you kind of have come through that process of thinking about Western and non-Western art and museums.

## KARA COONEY

Yeah, it's an interesting thing. But what do you do when you go into museum? You walk in and you go to the African art wing, or you go to the East Asian wing. And those are monikers that are quite progressive, right. You might go to the ancient Near Eastern wing or the Orientalist wing, but everything is categorized according to groups that we expect to belong together. And we don't mix those groups up, because that would be inappropriate. So the museum is there to put things- it's almost like the Egyptians, the Libyans go here, the West Asians go- or the Asiatics as they would say, would go there and the Nubians go here. And this is where we fit. And so, so many museums in Europe and the United States and in Africa, are there to put a certain idea of what humanity is at the center, and then surround it with these other things that are not us, to make us feel superior. And then to make the other thing something worthy of consumption beyond us. And I think when it was explained to me that I would be in the western category, it was considered something I should be happy about, because it was at the time when Mary Lefkowitz had written her book against Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, and had gone to, you know, taken him down point for point saying that Egypt is not the predecessor of the classical world, and it can't be considered as such. And so the National Gallery telling me oh, no, Egypt is Western. It made me go Wait, what? It's in Africa. But then you see that then, when I was acting as a co-curator at LACMA, LA County Museum of Art, for the reboot of the King Tut exhibition in 2005, all of those things came back, because on the floor, the main entrance floor of the exhibition hall, the LACMA people had a reconstruction of Tutankhamun that was done by a French team with very light skin color, that when it was put on the cover of National Geographic, and put on the museum floor, people flipped out. All the white people were like, Yes, this is King Tut. And he is one of us. And we make a claim to his body, his things, his gold, his power, all of that is ours. And there were people picketing in the Museum saying King Tut is Back and he's Black. And I still have my t-shirt. And- they gave me a t-shirt, which is really great. And that reconstruction was taken off view, because it was too much trouble. But that doesn't mean the problem went away. There's still the King Tut is white or King Tut is Black. And talk about messy and complicated, because then when you talk to modern Egyptians, they'll say, Don't you dare call us Black, because the word Black and Arabic is so tainted and problematic, and certainly not radically reclaimed in a positive way that the ancient Egyptians want to dis- modern Egyptian sorry, want to disassociate from being associated with being Black. But then if you push and you say, Well, yeah, but do you consider yourselves white? And they say, No. What do you consider yourselves? Well, not Black, but it's something kind of in between. But there's a lot of ambivalence and negativity surrounding the binary racial assignments that Americans automatically might make. And Egyptians, modern Egyptians, their world does not fit into this binary. It's revealed some of the colorism that ancient- I'm sorry, that modern Egypt deals with. Ancien of course, too. But, you know, it's as messy as could be. Because if you then put the proper skin color, what I would think would be the proper skin color for a Tutankhamun theban reconstruction, it might actually upset some modern Egyptians, who have been colonized six ways to Sunday into thinking that darker skin is problematic. And remember, Egypt still suffers from a north/south divide, where Cairo and Northern delta people is where the power is mainly at and the Thebans are considered less than in many ways, not always, and people- Egyptians will tell me that's not the truth. But I see the north/south divide. And I see people of Thebes Luxor modern day getting very upset about people of Cairo and northerners taking all of their awesome treasures and displaying them in museums up north. And I see Thebans or people of modern day Luxor, Asyut, other places in the south, being very upset when television shows show a skin color that is way too light for what they consider their North African skin to have looked like in the ancient world. So it's- this topic is like one of those third rail topics that you just can't stop talking about. It's so interesting. And I also taught a year at Howard University in Washington DC at historically Black college. And on my first day of class and I taught Chadwick Boseman in in very small hieroglyphs introductory class, which was great. And I remember being asked on my first day of teaching ever in a 4-4, 4 classes each semester circumstance, were the ancient Egyptians Black? And I naively asked, Well, what do you mean by Black? And then the discussion blew up within the classroom at Howard University. And we discussed what Black meant, we decided we were going to say people of color, I showed them pictures of people from Luxor in the slides that I had, this is back in the day when I had to go through my slides and look at pictures. And we decided that if

these people existed in Alabama in 1954, in the ancient world, if they looked like this, they would sit at the back of the bus. So, but then if you're having this conversation with Egyptian people today, you will have to have a very different perspective, because modern-day Egyptians don't like to be told that they are Black Africans, and there's a huge debate about what the skin color of ancient people was. And Afrocentrism gets involved, and I mean a patriarchal Afrocentrism, which is making a claim of Egypt for Black Africa, not for North African phenotypes, and it gets pretty hateful pretty fast. And I think that we can transcend it by getting rid of patriarchy itself, and going post patriarchal but yeah.

### STEPHANIE PARRISH

Wouldn't that'd be nice?

### KARA COONEY

Yeah, wouldn't it?

### STEPHANIE PARRISH

To go back a little bit to some of the exhibitions that you were mentioning, like King Tut, and you know, Jeannie mentioned at the beginning, The Eternal Egypt, and you know, there's a slew of of exhibitions over the last 50 years that the public has come to recognize, like these are the narratives around Egyptian art. And I sort of wonder, like, when you look at that 50 years, has there been a change in the narrative? Is it really different? Is Queen Nefertari's Egypt that different than King Tut? And a follow up question, if you could see any exhibition on Ancient Egypt, what would you like to see? What's a topic or theme you would love to see a museum do?

### KARA COONEY

Oh, damn. I mean, as for the first one, is there any difference from in the last 40 years, I don't see a difference. No. I see a celebration of wealth and riches and highly craftsmanship that few could afford. I see a celebration of women when it's rich women that we want to associate with rich, elite, and educated women. And I see very much a celebration of discovery, white male discovery, or discovery by Zahi Hawass, but patriarchal discovery, and claims of riches and wealth. And I see this in the new cycle when something is found, you know, and it has to be shown in the right, with the right pageantry, this discovery has been made, you know, the City of the Pharaohs and Luxor and all of these things. So, yeah, so that part, I think, hasn't changed too much. I don't think that I'll ever- that in my lifetime, I'll really get the exhibition that I would like to see. And, you know, the book that I wrote, The Good Kings is not being well received by my colleagues. I know that because it's not mentioned at all, there's just crickets, crickets, you know, nobody's even talking about it in a negative way. They're just not talking about it at all, because they don't want to. So the idea that one has to critically examine these kings in our own interest in them, our own obsession with them, that when you say, I've been obsessed with ancient Egypt since I was seven, why? What does it mean? What does it mean to want to know the golden Pharaoh? And what is this attraction? What is all of this about? I think that there's not much interest in such self referentiality. And there's actually a decided push against it that this thing that I do of saying, we are like the pharaohs, we use the same system. We have ideology, too. They have crooks and flails, we have this idea that we call democracy, which doesn't really work in practice, we're not doing it, but we protect it as an ideological sacred cow that you cannot criticize in any way. So the kinds of social critiques that I would like to see, and you could use all of the treasures, all of the beautiful things, to say all kinds of complicated and nuanced, you can make all kinds of conclusions about what power is and how it works upon us and how it gets us to think that we are participating in it even though we are exploited by it. That's the kind of thing I would do. But I'm not sure I would really get my way, because remember that these exhibitions are also part of nationalism. And so in the light of post colonialism if that's what we are, side-eye, you know, can we criticize modern day Egypt because of the colonialism that it has been victimized by. And so people then say, well, we can't criticize Egypt. That's their story to tell. In my post patriarchal thought, I say no, I can criticize modern Egypt just like modern United States, just like ancient Egypt, all of these things are part of patriarchal systems, some nationalistic, some regional xenophobia, what's the difference in practice? But many people don't criticize the Egyptians because they feel it is not their place as outsiders. That is something I do understand. And that's why in The Good Kings, I go after my own patriarchal systems a hell of a lot more than I go

after modern Egyptian systems. But when it fits, I'll put it in there.

### STEPHANIE PARRISH

So maybe I'll close with this question that came in from an educator, a member of our teacher advisory council after your talk in Portland, and she asked, What advice would you give educators like me who are interested in changing the way Ancient Egypt is taught in the standard World History curriculum? And how can we begin to integrate your scholarship relating to gender, race, and colonialism? How might a K-12 educator start to bring in some of this reflection and self-reflection?

### KARA COONEY

Yeah, I think the first thing one has to do is not deal with it as positivistically. And so much of this history, my kid is in sixth grade right now. And I just did a drop-in class for his Social Studies group a couple months ago. But the way you read about it in the textbook is a positivistic view of people of North Africa, who were able to build such amazing things and who were kind to their womenfolk. Or, you know, we're able to construct a mountain of stone 50 stories high. And it's all of the wonders of the ancient world, with very little discussion of social inequality. There was a whole packet on the laws of Hammurabi. And while they did go into slavery, brutal punishments for theft, and things like that. They did talk about it. I think it could have gone much further. In that vein, I think there was more and upholding of law and order and why we need it, but they just did it more brutally in the ancient world. But we need law and order today - kind of narrative going on. I know, I know, I was reading just going damn, this is interesting.

### SARA KRAJEWSKI

Indoctrination from the...

### KARA COONEY

The bad thieves, you know, look at those thieves. They're stealing. They should be punished, right? Yes, they cut off hands. And that's too much. What do we do? We put them in prison. And that's better, right? But it's still saying the thieves are bad, rather than asking why do people steal? And what are they stealing? And what are the circumstances? They're not asking that? It's a very interesting way of looking at it. So I think the more critical one can be of these systems, the better and the more we- the other thing that I see is that we look at these ancient world systems, and we separate ourselves from them, and we create a fiction of modern exceptionalism by doing so. So you look at Mesopotamia - look, they cut off hands, but they invented law and order, and we now don't cut off hands and we do it better. Or look at ancient Egypt, you know, they were able to build that pyramid, we would never do something so selfish, we go into space. And so we, you know, and there that narrative that Us and Them is always there. So our modern exceptionalism is intact, our shining city on a hill is there unsullied, right? We're the good people. So all of this is, in my opinion, an indoctrination into systems of power, where you fit and where you don't. And it is all very cleverly done. And we are writing propaganda using ancient peoples and peoples outside of our own cultural system, without even seeing it as such, and how one can break that apart. I mean, let's just take one example of female power. All the textbooks are like Hatshepsut was able to be a female king or maybe they'll use the word queen and that's okay. But there's like- she was queen, she could be powerful. You could be powerful, too. And they don't talk about the woman as being a tool of the patriarchal system as a placeholder and they don't talk about that Hatshepsut's name is not known in modern cultural memory that Shakespeare didn't write any plays about her. He wrote a play about the failure, Cleopatra, who is remembered as a failure, a glorious heap of destruction, and that we tell ourselves that story so we can remember female power as being very bad, right? So we just look at it positivistically and just say little girl, you can be a leader and YAY YOU without asking what these women were asked to do, why they got power in Egypt, not in other places? Is Egypt really enlightened and Mesopotamia not? Or maybe the system is just way more authoritarian and family-based, which means the women have to step into keep their hoarded power. And Mesopotamia and Greece are more competitive and the women have no shot. But they're there standing by their man no matter what. So, you know, are we going to get any sort of patriarchal views of these things? I don't think so. I just gave a talk about The Good Kings to a group in Denver that excoriated my conclusions about kingship and authoritarianism, and were very upset about me linking modern and ancient power about my slide that showed Putin with a bare chest on

horseback next to Thutmose III with his bare chest and kilt. I'm like, look masculine power, same same. And this is how we depict it. And there was- there were a group of old white men in that Egyptophile group that were scandalized by what I was saying, like deeply butt-hurt, about what I was saying. And yeah, I don't see these, these bastions of power changing in the Board of Governors at the Getty, or your museum, or my institution as quickly as we would like, because we all follow the money. And when you get down to it, if I'm a feminist looking at who has the reins of power, who holds the resources, it is the white men or men in our society, and women have very little place, and non-binary people have very little place, just follow the CEOs and my goodness, you will see that it's getting worse rather than better.

Well this all makes me want to have a podcast on positivism, too. Like, we could just talk about that, in general, and museums, and academia, and colonialism, and structures.

Yeah, and how academia celebrates it with particularism. You should follow the dynasty you shouldn't compare. You have to look at them on their own terms. You can't be Universalist, what are you thinking? It's It's irresponsible, they tell me. That I'm immoral because I'm comparing the ancient Egyptians with today. Because our systems are so different. I'm like, you know what? I don't think they really are. And I don't think we're as exceptional as you really think we are. Positivism, it's lurking everywhere. In every history class, in every Scantron exam. Everywhere.

### STEPHANIE PARRISH

Yeah. Well, thank you. I think that kind of closes my line of questioning. And I do hope we get to see an exhibition that tackles some of the topics and themes that, you know, you'd like to see. I think maybe your book, *The Good Kings* needs to become an exhibition.

### KARA COONEY

I can't imagine. That would be quite extraordinary. Who's going to lend? Which museums will lend their objects to our critical gaze? I don't know

### STEPHANIE PARRISH

Right? That's a whole other question.

### KARA COONEY

But then you've got to follow the money, and everyone wants to commodify this stuff. So how are you gonna do it? It's all about copyright and ownership. It's so interesting. But yeah, you know, Nat Geo let me publish it. And they let me say what I needed and wanted to say they didn't pull me back once. So there are institutions that are being brave, they do exist. And my own institution at UCLA is extraordinarily brave, and they support me. That doesn't mean they're not part of patriarchal, unequal society. But these things have to change from the inside out. And I think that we are starting to do that. And that's why there is such polarization and there is such fear. And there is such ideological pushback of, you know, forced pregnancies in Texas, and other things, gerrymandering over and not being able to vote.

### JEANNIE KENMOTSU

Yeah, well, we're having a lot of these discussions, especially internally, as well, Kara. And so I mean, I think you really hit the nail on the head in terms of really thinking about what is the future and where does change begin? So thank you. I really feel like this has been a wide ranging discussion. It's been amazing to have your critical perspective. We've covered lived experience in ancient Egypt and race and patriarchy, grave goods, museums, the academy, and above all power. And I think that's exactly the kind of stuff that we wanted to dig into in our awkward questions. And difficult questions for you. I hope that this is, you know, just one installment of our conversations. Thank you so much.

### KARA COONEY

Oh, thank you. I had a great time. These were amazingly awkward, third rail questions, and I love nothing more.

**SARA KRAJEWSKI**

Thank you so much for being game with us. Yeah.

**STEPHANIE PARRISH**

We need more Kara Cooneys in the world.

**SARA KRAJEWSKI**

Absolutely.

**JEANNIE KENMOTSU**

And that was just the tip of the iceberg of the awkward questions we could have discussed with Kara Cooney. I'd like to once again thank Sara Krajewski, Stephanie Parrish, and Kathleen Ash-Milby for participating in this episode's execution, as well as all of our colleagues at the Portland Art Museum who make all of this work possible. I would especially like to thank our Visitor Services Associates in the galleries who are often approached with awkward questions much like the ones you just heard. Of course, a special thanks goes out to Kara Cooney and her producer, Amber Myers Wells - you can find a link to their podcast, AFTERLIVES with Kara Cooney, in this show's description or at [portlandartmuseum.org/podcast](http://portlandartmuseum.org/podcast), where you can also find a full episode transcript. Art Unbound is produced and edited by Jon Richardson with music by Mark Orton. We encourage you to subscribe, rate, and review the podcast on Apple Podcasts or your preferred podcast player. Thanks again for listening to Art Unbound.